# The War within the War in the Mountain Region

## By Michael C. Hardy*

From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 50:2 (spring 2011).

Images may differ from those in the original article.

For the few citizens of Burnsville in western North Carolina's Yancey County, April 10, 1864, dawned as an unseasonably cold day. More startling than the north wind freezing the residents, though, was the appearance of 40 women in the town streets. These mountain women headed for a storehouse where state authorities were keeping a supply of grain, probably meant to help the wives and widows of Confederate soldiers. The 40 women took all the grain they could carry.

The next day, approximately 75 men under the command of Confederate army deserter Montreville Ray arrived in Burnsville. They wounded the local Confederate enrolling officer, nearly killed a local store owner, and stole about 150 state-owned rifles. A few days later, Confederate soldiers arrived from Asheville. After some cannon shots, they charged the town, running off Ray and his men. The general store of Amos Ray, the father of Montreville Ray, was burned. According to local legend, the McElroy House served as a hospital for the wounded from both sides in this skirmish.

No official Civil War battles took place in western North Carolina. But the Mountain region saw its share of disagreement and conflict. Had you been a young person living in Virginia or around Atlanta, Georgia, during the war, you would have known who the enemy was: they were wearing uniforms unlike the ones worn by your father and older brothers. In western North Carolina, seldom did the enemy wear uniforms. Instead, he was dressed like the people who lived next door. In fact, the enemy might have *been* the person next door. Montreville Ray had been born in Yancey County.

Most western North Carolinians had opposed secession. But once the state left the Union in May 1861, men quickly volunteered for the Confederate army; an estimated 27,000 from the Mountain counties served. Some Confederate recruits were old: John Pate, of Cherokee County, was 75 when he joined the 29th North Carolina Troops. Others were quite young. Haywood County's John C. Brown was 16 when he joined the 16th North Carolina Troops. These men and boys left their families and communities, marching away to fight in places like Chancellorsville, Virginia, and Atlanta. Over 5,000 western Tar Heels died, in action on the battlefield or of disease. North Carolina's Confederate soldiers gained distinction in many of the war's most famous engagements, including Bethel, Gettsyburg, and Chickamauga.

Support for Confederate soldiers was widespread throughout western North Carolina. Women in various communities organized themselves into aid societies, such as one in Caldwell County called the Ladies of Lenoir. These women raised money for the troops. They made and collected clothing, haversacks, blankets, medical supplies, and food. There were other collective efforts. Cornelia C. Henry recorded in her diary in November 1863 that there was a Ladies Hospital in


©2011 North Carolina Museum of History
Office of Archives and History, N.C. Department of Cultural Resources

Asheville, and Bethel Baptist Church in McDowell County took up donations to buy religious reading material for the 58th North Carolina Troops. Many citizens made individual contributions, sending soldiers packages of food and clothes.

A small number of people in the Mountain region continued to support the Union even after North Carolina left it. Many of these families were happy to keep quietly to themselves, until the Confederate government instituted a draft in the spring of 1862. This law required white males, ages 18 to 35, to serve in the Confederate army. Some men with unionist feelings slipped across the mountains to the west and enlisted in Federal regiments instead. Jackson Guinn, of Haywood County, joined the 20th Kentucky Infantry in September 1864. A few men from Jackson, Macon, Clay, Cherokee, and Buncombe Counties joined the Sixth Indiana Cavalry in the summer of 1863.

Some western North Carolina men who joined the Union army or navy were prisoners of war—Confederate soldiers captured in a battle. Many of these men joined one of the United States volunteer regiments sent out West. Watauga County's Hezekiah Thomas, for example, was serving in the 58th North Carolina Troops when he was captured just south of Atlanta, Georgia, in September 1864. Thomas was sent to the Camp Douglas, Illinois, prison camp. In May 1865 he volunteered for the U.S. Army because he was "about to starve to death." Thomas was sent to Nebraska to make hay for the Federal government, so he would not have to fight against his former comrades.

In autumn 1863, western North Carolina men began to join local Federal regiments: the Second North Carolina Mounted Infantry, the Third North Carolina Mounted Infantry, and the 13th Tennessee Cavalry. These regiments operated in the mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee, clashing with battalions of Home Guard. In July 1863 Governor Zebulon Vance, a Buncombe County native, created the Home Guard. Men who were generally too old or young for regular service, as well as discharged soldiers, made up this group. The group was assigned to round up deserters and draft dodgers hiding out in the mountains, and to protect civilians.

Many residents considered the local Federal regiments—especially the Third North Carolina—to be scoundrels and thieves because they often plundered, robbed, and tormented Mountain families. Jonathan and Malinda Horton, of Watauga County, estimated that their home was robbed 18 times in 14 days during April 1865, mostly by men claiming to be Union soldiers. Some western North Carolina men only joined the Federal forces in the final months of the war, after Confederate defeat was certain. In all, about 2,000 western North Carolina men served in the Union army.

Another group of people, often called *dissidents*, lived in the Mountain region. They cared for neither government, and they largely wished to be left alone. These people took to mountain caves and hollows once the draft law passed, doing their best to hide out until the war ended. There also were men hiding out who had joined or been drafted into the Confederate army, and later deserted. These deserters often formed groups. One deserter camp in northern Mitchell County was rumored to have numbered 250 men. Another in Wilkes County reportedly had hundreds more. These men, usually well armed, caused enormous problems. The only way they could eat and stay clothed was to steal. The groups frequently skirmished with the Home Guard.


©2011 North Carolina Museum of History
Office of Archives and History, N.C. Department of Cultural Resources

At times, regular Confederate soldiers arrived to break up deserter bands. Both the state and Confederate governments tried to provide some assistance, like food and salt, for the families of men in Confederate service. Families of deserters did not qualify for such aid. Their desperation led to raids, sometimes led by starving women like those in Burnsville.

Along with deserters and conscription dodgers, the area included some Federal soldiers who had escaped from prison camps farther east. These men were trying to return to Federal lines in Kentucky and Tennessee. Often, they traveled on a type of "underground railroad," meeting guides who conducted them from one safe house to another. The Banner home in Banner Elk (present-day Avery County) and the old English Inn in Spruce Pine (Mitchell County) were two of these places. The guides were mostly local men and women, such as Keith and Malinda Blalock. This Union-leaning pair had enlisted in the Confederate army (she disguised as a boy named Sam), but neither got a chance to desert as planned. He gave himself a rash, and she revealed her identity, in order to be discharged. The Blalocks spent the rest of the war in western North Carolina, aiding the Union cause. The Home Guard often clashed with people helping escaped Union prisoners. At one such skirmish in the Globe section of Caldwell County in January 1865, Keith Blalock lost an eye.

Even the small minority populations in western North Carolina found themselves drawn into the conflict. Many American Indians in the Smoky Mountains joined Thomas's Legion of Cherokee Indians and Highlanders, which served as part of the Confederate army under Colonel William H. Thomas. A few Cherokee served in the Union army. Some enslaved African Americans, such as Mitchell County's Turner Chambers, escaped during the war years. Turner joined the 40th Regiment United States Colored Troops in April 1865. A few free persons of color served in the Confederate army. Brothers Franklin and William Henry Cozzens, of Watauga County, joined the 37th North Carolina Troops in November 1861. Franklin was killed at the Battle of Second Manassas in August 1862, leaving behind a wife and infant daughter. William survived the war and moved to Yancey County.

While the Civil War formally ended in the spring of 1865, conflict continued in the Mountain region for some time. Bands of men kept roaming the countryside, and it took years to quell the violence. Many former soldiers simply moved away, looking to start life anew in a different county or state. For generations, people passed down stories of destruction and hardship. Some stories told of truly tragic events like the Shelton Laurel Massacre, in which 13 suspected unionists were executed by firing squad, without a trial, in Madison County. They had been captured by Confederates in response to a Federal raid in Marshall that led to the deaths of a Confederate officer's children. Other accounts have been simple stories of hiding supplies in the woods from Union soldiers or bushwhackers. While no great armies fought in western North Carolina, the war and the hardships it caused were as real for residents there as they were for people living near Bentonville or Wilmington.

**Michael C. Hardy has written numerous books and magazine articles about North Carolina's role in the Civil War. In October 2010 he was honored as North Carolina Historian of the Year by the North Carolina Society of Historians. At the time of this article's publication, Hardy lived in western North Carolina and blogged about the war at michaelchardy.blogspot.com.*


©2011 North Carolina Museum of History
Office of Archives and History, N.C. Department of Cultural Resources